

Three, More or Less, Little Maids of Paris

By HELEN FOX

With illustration by Wynn

FRENCH women are all characterized by an unmistakable stamp that distinguishes them from others of their species the world over. The wicked little lady of Montmartre, the dowered girl of bourgeois family, the little stenographer whose pitiful salary is eked out by an "ami," or the aristocratic grande dame—each, no matter what her position in life, is marked in varying degree by that vague and indefinable quality that we on this side of the ocean call "charm."

I learned a great deal about this charm thing during the year and a half I lived in Paris, and I think I can dispel for my readers the mysticism that surrounds the word. In the first place, while charm is a subtle quality, it is by no means a mysterious gift of God—like genius, for instance. It is, with divers nuances, a combination of personality, individuality and sophistication.

It may be also described as a pot-pourri of mild vices and redeeming virtues—using both words as they are arbitrarily applied in America, an application that is not valid, since Anglo-Saxon values cannot be used in judging a Latin civilization. Just as we are apt to consider certain phases of the Frenchman's life, that he finds eminently desirable, as vices, so he may think that our Puritan virtues are futile, unnatural, and even hypocritical and vicious.

It is not for us, with our values based upon graceful illusions and ideals, to label the Frenchman's values, which are part of a philosophy of life based upon disillusionment and sophistication. Let me say in passing that this disillusionment is not nearly as depressing as our illusions. Illusions can always be, and usually are, disappointed. Disillusionment leads one to make the most of life, and, not expecting too much, one is often surprised by getting more out of it than was ever anticipated.

All these things, and more, I learned from the French girls I met in Paris. Each of these, no matter how "bad," had some redeeming "goodness," or, no matter how "virtuous," was just human enough, just natural enough, and perhaps just "wicked" enough to be real and interesting.

There was Lucette, known as "The Rat," a little knockabout girl, who haunted the Café du Dome in the Latin Quarter, vamping American males with her phrase or two of English—or rather American—picked up from a sailor or Sammy during the war. She was a coarse girl of about eighteen, not specially attractive and dressed in "hand-me-outs" from a sister a little more fortunate than herself, of whom I shall write anon. She had spindle legs and arms. The latter, in spite of their thinness, were rarely adorned with sleeves, and sometimes her legs were no more clothed than her arms. She had a heavy mouth that infinite layers of rouge made heavier, and bright eyes rimmed with black, that always twinkled with fun, except on the few occasions when I saw them tear-filled. She affected a Buster Brown haircut, with a great green ribbon bow winging away from one side. This was, no doubt, an effort to make her look doll-like. And what a strange, warped, bedraggled little doll she was!

Yes! Lucette was warped and vulgar and thoroughly unmoral, and she was on the streets and footloose because she chose to be, yet she had many friends ready to defend her from those who did not see in her what they saw—her sense of humor. Awry and twisted though she was, there were many ready to tolerate her vulgarity and chat with her now and again in the café or, account of that one redeeming characteristic of hers—a rare wit, twisted as herself, filled with a vulgar cynicism and a daredevil defiance of the world.

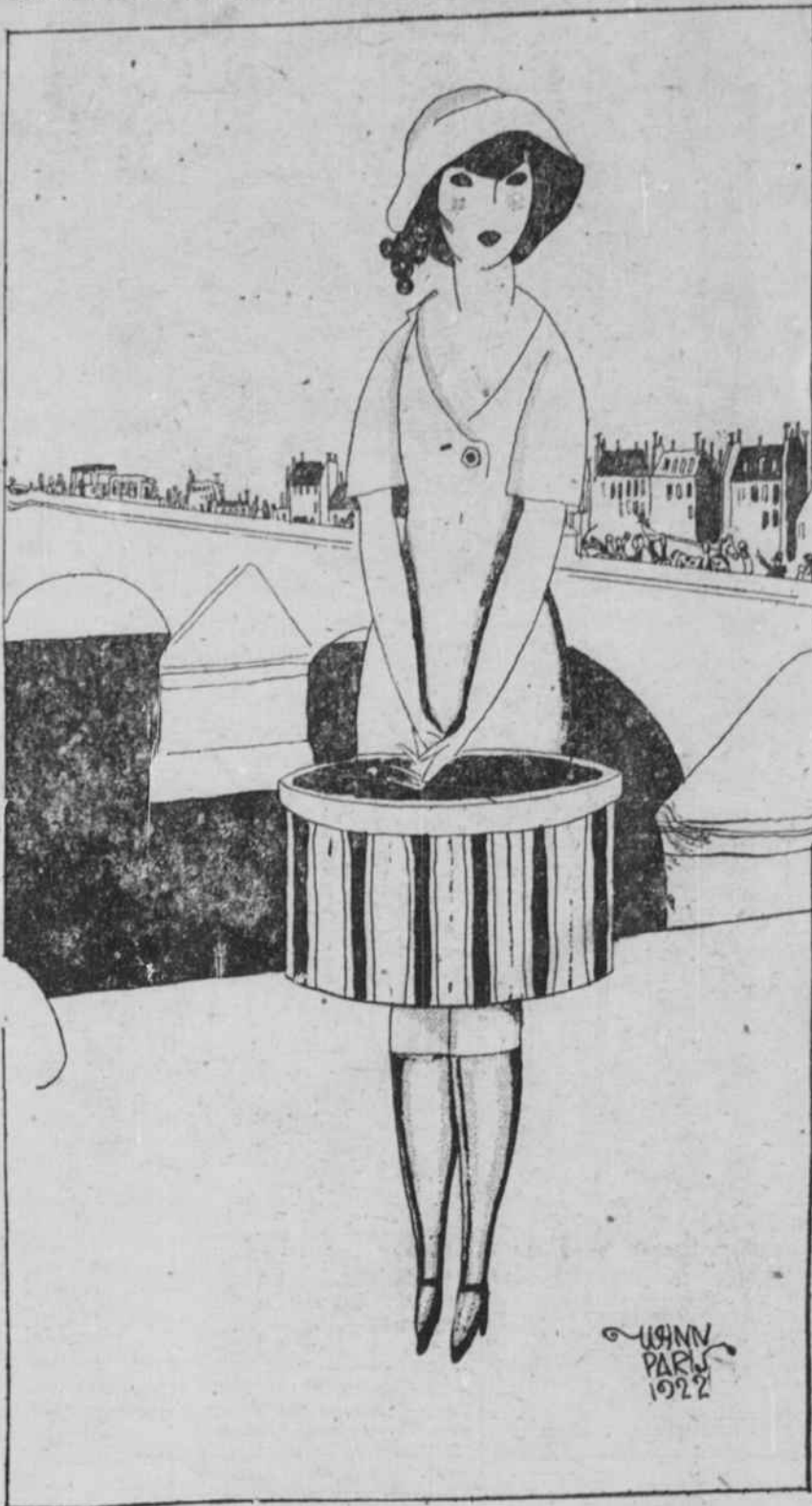
This sense of humor often led her into amazing impudences. One day I saw her tread on a gendarme's shadow for a hundred paces or so with a jaunty imitation of the policeman's officiality. Another time I was literally flabbergasted at seeing her approach Charlie Chaplin the be-

loved Charlot of France, and, putting up her heavy red lips, saying, "Kees me!" Charlot was rescued by his friends, but Lucette the Rat, in spite of all her cheapness and crudity, got the laugh she was looking for from her audience. "Kees me!" "Gif me a cigarette!" and "Whoops, ma dear!" is the extent of the Rat's knowledge of English—but her knowledge of human nature? Ah! There she ranks Freud himself!

Then there was Raymonde, the Rat's sister, several steps higher up in society. Raymonde's lot was pleasanter than Lucette's, because from the first day that

then she did a thing that is most impractical for a girl in her station in life—she learned to love him too much. And when he left her to return to America to marry an American girl, she lost her philosophy of life, her determination and ambition; in fact, almost life itself. The kindly little Frenchwoman who had taken her under her wing gave her new courage, and she started out with her sofa cover dress to model again.

Raymonde now has another American ami. She found him when he was drinking himself to death. He has stopped drinking through her influence and vigi-



Jeanne, though decorous when mamma's eyes were upon her, was a wicked little flirt

a good-hearted young artist found the sisters sleeping in the Luxembourg Gardens and brought them home to his mother, who made dresses for them out of her sofa covers. Raymonde accepted the help of mother and son and planned to get somewhere. Lucette, on the other hand, went but three times to the stenography class that the kind little Frenchwoman paid for with her last sous, and then played the truant to attend studio parties and other carousals.

Raymonde was an artist's model. Before her benefactor had discovered her in the Gardens she had had an American ami, an artist who in between times taught her to use paints and brushes herself. And

lance. She is quite happy, but her former experience has made her a little hard. She likes him; in fact, she probably loves him—with just enough reservation to protect her if he should leave her one day to return to an American wife or sweetheart.

This little Raymonde is sweet and gentle. She is quiet and more refined than the café girls. She would love to marry and be a faithful wife and the mother of children, but she has no dowry, and an ami is the nearest thing to marriage that she can have.

Then there is Fleurian, a lovely, exotic dancer, born in a gypsy circus wagon, with the capricious wilfulness of a queen.

She has a slender, sinuous body that is fascinatingly snakelike through a series of improvised dance steps, whenever mood moves her to a solo performance, any cabaret, dancing boîte, or café happens to be in at the time. She is beautiful, with an extraordinary, almost white pallor, black almond-shaped eyes artfully outlined with an eyebrow pencil, a small, full red mouth and a shock of short, wavy black hair. Her dancing personality and her loveliness could help a leading part in any musical comedy or revue, or she could, if she wished, marry without a dowry, but she won't do either. No musical comedy "lead" and not even marriage to a wealthy French writer can induce her to give up her freedom. I have known her to turn down both. To have to go to a theater every night at 7:15 would be too much of a bore. And the rehearsals—now that! The only thing that could possibly be more loathsome would be to manage a household and servants on the right bank of the river.

So Fleurian continues to be the center of her group of satellites, composed of both men and women, starting the agreeably with her eccentricities and seeking out every excitement life has to offer. Some day she will be stabbed in the back, in a den of Apaches. I have an idea that if that ever happens she will fling her arms open to welcome death and with one last exotic gesture cry "This is a fitting way for me to die!"

At the other end of the pole from Fleurian, although both inhabit the same quarter, is Marceline, a little south peasant girl from Brittany. She came to Paris, having run away from a cruel stepfather, and now, not knowing any trade or how to earn a livelihood, is astray in the city, guided only by a tremendous desire to keep off the streets with a man's hat and an old American coat she sits forlornly in the café waiting for somebody to offer her a sandwich. She poses occasionally in one of the schools. She gets six francs, or about 42 cents, for posing five hours, with practically no rests.

Poor little Marceline seems to have Loodoo. Last spring, after several of her American friends had substituted presentable clothing for her army overcoat and man's hat, Marceline found an American ami. This was not at all what her friends wished for her, but with barely enough to live on themselves, under the circumstances it was the best that could be done. Even if she had found work in a factory or if she had been trained for stenography the chances were very doubtful that she would earn enough to care for herself. A French stenographer, rebelling at getting only 300 or 400 francs a month, is, like as not, informed of the advisability of getting an ami by her employer. And the suggestion is made that the salary is meant for pin money. Girls living at home with their parents are aided at home, and, therefore, can live on very little. But little Marceline had no home and no parents that she could depend upon.

To return to my story. Just as Marceline was becoming very fond of the American, who, won by her smile, her simplicity and her honesty, had given her little apartment to care for, he died without leaving a will. Somebody in his audience knew that he meant to leave a few belongings and his last pay check for her, but by the time this was discovered the French court had already sent all its effects to his mother in America. Marceline, with just the memory of the childish joy she took in pottering about her little kitchen, is sitting once again in the café, waiting for some one to buy her a meal. A few of the rough corners have been polished off, and she is no longer a hoydenish young tomboy she used to be. She is quiet and has clear, honest, wise eyes. She still has her old friends to keep an eye on her, and who knows better fortune may await her.

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